

OBITUARY

Brian Robert Baker

Brian Baker died suddenly, but peacefully, on the 13th February 2000, a tragedy for his family and a sad loss to British entomology to which Brian had given so much throughout his life.

Born on the 13th July 1924, Brian was a resident of Reading in Berkshire and there was probably nobody who knew better the highways and byways, the woods, reed beds and the chalk downs of this varied and interesting county. Brian would recall how he learnt much of his field craft knowledge from Conrad Runge and other local entomologists during his teenage years, knowledge which he was to pass on so willingly to others in the years that followed.

In 1942, Brian joined the Royal Air Force and spent part of his service in the Far East, in the immediate post-war period. There he no doubt studied the local flora and fauna but it was the British Lepidoptera which was to be his main lifetime interest. On leaving the RAF Brian joined the staff at Reading Museum & Art Gallery, becoming their deputy director in 1956. Whilst at the museum he studied at Birkbeck College, University of London, and obtained a degree in Natural Science in 1956. In the following year he became a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society and in 1963 he was awarded a Fellowship of the Museums Association. Brian retired in 1987 but this did not see the end of his association with the museum which he continued to visit frequently, and to take a great interest in its long renovation and the housing and display of the important collections that it contains.

Brian joined the British Entomological & Natural History Society in 1952 and regularly attended their meetings and annual exhibitions during the years that followed. He was elected President of the Society in 1983. Brian was also a long-standing member of the Reading & District Natural History Society which he joined in 1936, at the tender age of twelve, and of which he remained an active and influential member for the rest of his life. Brian was twice President of that society, including during their centenary year, besides being their entomological recorder for many years, indoor meetings secretary and regular supporter of the annual "mothing night" when he would introduce botanists, coleopterists and those with a general interest in natural history to the delights of seeing and recording moths in one of his favourite localities. In all his associations with these societies it is so apparent that Brian was more than willing to give his time and energy back to an interest from which he clearly gained so much personal satisfaction during his life.

In 1977 Brian started collecting together the records of the Lepidoptera of Berkshire which were eventually to be published as *The Butterflies and Moths of Berkshire* in 1994. Not for Brian the dubious pleasures of the word processor, he laboured long and hard on this project using a card index and typewriter to produce the text for the first comprehensive county list since *The Victoria County History of Berkshire* of 1906. Each record was carefully checked for accuracy and to ensure that it properly fell within the boundaries of vice-county 22. Brian was an acknowledged expert on the *Sesiidae* (clearwing moths) and it was no surprise when he was asked to write a chapter of *The Moths and Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland*, describing the life histories of these fascinating moths.

Brian was a founder member of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalists Trust (BBONT). In these days, when such county organisations are an accepted part of the conservation scene, it is perhaps difficult to appreciate that they

were once tender shoots which could so easily have withered away. From 1960 to 1970, during this formative period, Brian was the Berkshire Secretary to the Trust. It was through his efforts and gentle personality, and the generosity of a local landowner, that the lovely Moor Copse Reserve was bequeathed to BBONT and I can think of no better memorial to Brian's name and memory than this particular event.

Brian had a long association with Pamber Forest where he collected or studied insects over many years. How well he approved of the management plans recently introduced to bring this area back to its former glory. He would recall many of his trips to this area but I often heard him say, rather sadly, that it was a pity it wasn't in Berkshire as he couldn't use the records in his book! The last time that I saw Brian in Pamber Forest he was sugaring the same oak trees from which he had recorded *Catocala promissa* (light crimson underwing) many years ago, anxious to know if this magnificent moth was still present in the forest.

The notes above detail just some of Brian's achievements but many lepidopterists today will have other, more personal, memories of this remarkable man. I first met Brian in 1984 when I moved to Reading from Derbyshire, and I was immediately impressed not only by his knowledge but by the friendly and enthusiastic manner in which he introduced me to some of the many interesting sites around Reading. At the Woolhampton reed beds he proudly showed me the old bunker in which he spent many nights whilst surveying the moths of the area during one busy season. He teased post-hibernation larvae of *Diachrysis chryson* (scarce burnished brass) from rank vegetation like a conjurer producing rabbits from a hat, and showed me how to find freshly emerged *Hydraecia petasitis* (butterbur) clinging to the underside of leaves along the river bank. He was always much more interested in hearing about other people's captures or records than telling about his own. He actively encouraged an interest in all aspects of natural history in all he met and showed so much patience when explaining things to people with much less knowledge and experience than himself.

His study at his lovely home in Caversham was an Aladdin's cave of treasures for all those with an interest in butterflies and moths. Cabinets, breeding cages, setting boards, books, paintings, spent matches and pipe cleaners filled the room and it would have taken a full week of careful study to have done justice to his collection. Each insect in his collection seemed to tell a story of a particular field trip, a success in the breeding cage or his memories of finding the larva after many hours of patient field work.

Brian will be remembered with affection and respect by all who knew him, and with gratitude by those whom he helped and inspired. Our sincere sympathy is extended to Heather, to Mark and Anne and all members of his family.

DAVID YOUNG